

Aftermath: Women's Organizations In Postconflict Georgia

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Preface

AS PART OF ITS ongoing studies on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the societies ravaged by civil wars, USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) undertook a multicountry assessment of gender issues in postconflict societies. The assessment concentrated on three sets of questions:

- What has been the impact of intrastate conflicts on women? How did these conflicts affect their economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities? What are the major problems and challenges facing women in these societies?
- What types of women's organizations have emerged during the postconflict era to address the challenges women face and to promote gender equality? What types of activities do they undertake? What has been their overall impact on the empowerment of women? What factors affect their performance and impact?
- What has been the nature and emphasis of assistance provided by USAID and other donor agencies to women's organizations? What are some of the major problem areas in international assistance?

The purpose of the assessment was to generate a body of empirically grounded knowledge that could inform the policy and programmatic interventions of USAID and other international donor agencies.

CDIE sent research teams to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda. These teams conducted in-depth interviews with key informants, reviewed literature, and conducted fieldwork. They prepared comprehensive reports, which were reviewed by USAID and outside scholars.

This paper—written by Alice L. Morton, Susan Allen Nan, Thomas Buck, and Feride Zurikashvili—examines the role women's organizations play in channeling assistance to women and in helping them meet the challenges of postconflict Georgia. I am grateful to the authors for their insightful analysis.

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1. Introduction

This report explores the role that women's organizations play in channeling assistance to women and in helping them meet the challenges of the postconflict situation economically, socially, and politically. It emphasizes the extent to which participation in such organizations holds promise for women's empowerment and the democratization of the postconflict polity.* A complementary report examines the effect of the conflict on internally displaced women.

Initially, the study was designed to explore the situation of two groups of internally displaced Georgian women. The main group is made up of those of Georgian extraction who fled the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic after armed conflict broke out in 1992. The second is a group of ethnically Georgian women who were displaced earlier because of a similar conflict in South Ossetia. This enduring "temporary" displacement augments and prolongs the disruptions caused by the conflict itself.

The team that produced this report† attempted to distinguish between displaced women who were settled in the state or public sector (usually in slightly renovated hotels or other structures owned by the Georgian government) and those who lodged with relatives or others in the private sector.‡ Just before fieldwork began, at USAID/Tbilisi's request, the original study was expanded to include women's organizations neither composed of nor oriented toward internally displaced women but rather toward all Georgian women, given the radical economic and political changes that have occurred since independence in 1991. The study team attempted to meet this request by interviewing key informants and, in some instances, visiting beneficiaries of NGOs not concerned with displaced people. In line with the original study design, two in-depth organizational case studies of organizations concerned with internally displaced women also were prepared.

Two background papers for this study were prepared before the three-person expatriate team visited Georgia in October 1999.§ The team was in Georgia for three weeks just before the parliamentary elections. Team members designed the study to be as participatory and transparent as possible. The team held preliminary meetings with USAID staff, other donor staff, and selected leaders of women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to explain the study hypotheses and approach and to have these knowledgeable informants vet the study's outline and methodology. The team also asked the same group to provide feedback at the end of the field phase. That help proved invaluable, and the team is grateful to all those Georgians who helped make this study the beginning of an ongoing discussion. In all, 105 questionnaires were filled out and analyzed, and 8 focus groups were held. In most instances, those interviewed were direct or indirect beneficiaries of the NGOs whose leaders the team also interviewed.

*The USAID mission to the Republic of Georgia cleared the study's scope of work and assisted the study team in making contact with key informants in the Georgian and international nongovernmental organization (NGO) communities. However, the mission wished that it be made clear that this report is not an evaluation of its programs.

†The team included Dr. Feride Zurikashvili of Tbilisi State University, who brought with her a student interpreter and six students who were experienced field interviewers. The three expatriate team members—Dr. Alice Morton, team leader and technical adviser for the overall CDIE study; Dr. Susan Allen Nan, an expert on conflict resolution in the Caucasus; and Thomas Buck, a specialist on eastern Europe—are grateful to them for their insights and hard work.

‡During study preparation, a window of opportunity opened up for the team to visit Abkhazia, since women's organizations there were holding a conference on peace. The mission did not clear the team to attend this meeting because of the insecurity of the border situation.

§The first is based on a broad review of the literature on Georgia's recent history, the conflicts, and the situation of internally displaced women, prepared by Mr. Buck. The second, an informative report based on secondary sources and original field research, was prepared by Dr. Zurikashvili.

2. Georgian Women's Organizations

Factors Leading to the Emergence Of Women's Organizations In the Postconflict Era

Conflict in Georgia began virtually as soon as the Soviet Union collapsed and independence was declared in 1991. Thus, in determining how the third sector—civil society, including the staggering growth of women's organizations—opened up, it is important to distinguish between the factors created by the conflict and those that grew out of the overall economic and institutional collapse. These factors, in turn, should be viewed as distinct from, though linked to, the subsequent shift from centrally planned communist economics to market-oriented reforms and democratic political models.

Women's organizations began to be established from the first days of independence, although the growth in absolute numbers increased most markedly between 1995, when the economy and polity improved, and the present. This is when the third sector began to open up. This tendency was particularly marked in Tbilisi, although organizations oriented toward internally displaced persons also began to proliferate in regions where the internally displaced were resettled.* Even at the beginning, donors stimulated this rapid growth—for example, the joint UN–government of Georgia Women in the Development Process Project organized national and regional women's forums (UNDP 1999, 79–82). Both with help and on their own, Georgian women began to identify common problems and create new organizations to respond to them. Over time, the priorities of these organizations changed. That reflected an evolution not only in the problems themselves but also in the responsiveness of leaders of women's groups to donor signals.

Figure 1 shows how the concerns of women's organizations have evolved since independence.

The groundswell of interest among women in addressing the problems first identified in figure 1 appears to have been quickly reoriented toward additional topics because of the Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts and, later, because of the reorientation of donor programs away from humanitarian assistance.

In 1999 all the 1997 and 1998 priorities remained valid, but because of the election, further emphasis was given to injecting gendered content into political party platforms, encouraging women candidates to take part in parliamentary elections, strengthening women's participation in local governance, and transitioning from humanitarian assistance, through self-reliance, to development approaches.

Since the first grants given by the Soros Foundation, it seems that donors have identified the problems and set the agenda for women's NGOs in Georgia. Yet, as material presented in the two case studies attests, these organizations have, to a large extent, started out with their own agendas and sought to meet perceived needs of their

*One relatively reliable source for the number and respective scopes of local NGOs in Georgia oriented toward internally displaced persons (IDPs) is a directory put together by CHCH in 1999 in the context of the European Union delegation's program, Development of IDP-oriented NGOs in Georgia, with assistance from the International Rescue Committee, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and UNOCHA. This directory lists 50 organizations with separate listings for local branches of some. Of these, the team visited or spoke with representatives of about one-third, both in Tbilisi and in the regions. This list includes both women's organizations and those whose members or leaders are both women and men. ATINATI for example, was founded by a couple, as was the cultural–humanitarian foundation Sokhumi (see also *Georgia in Transition: Composite Organization Case Study*).

Regarding women's organizations, the Horizonti Foundation's *Caucasus Women's NGO Needs Assessment—1998* is a better source. The Georgia portion of that study included 40 organizations, 32 from Tbilisi and 8 from the regions. The selection criteria were similar to those used for this study: 1) organizations for which women's problems represent either the main or an additional sphere of activity; 2) organizations represented in the Women's Leadership Training Program financed by USAID and implemented by the Academy for Educational Development; 3) recently established and Soviet-era organizations; and 4) geographic location. The database for this study was made up of the Horizonti Foundation's own lists, the Georgian NGOs Database published by ITIC, and other data sources, including the Ministry of Justice, with which organizations must register.

Figure 1. The Evolving Concerns of Women's Organizations

1991	Protection of human rights; protection of women's rights (disclosure of facts of violence, rights of women prisoners); charity (vulnerable population groups).
1992	Charity (vulnerable population groups, widows and orphans, people deprived as a result of the conflict); elevating women's status.
1993	Charity (internally displaced persons, families of soldiers and families with many children); psychological rehabilitation of the victims of violence; medical assistance to women, assistance to professional women for participation in business.
1994	Charity (internally displaced persons, families of soldiers and families with many children, homeless children, disabled persons); psychological rehabilitation of the victims of violence; medical assistance to women; rights of certain population groups (ethnic minorities, women in confinement, newborns, professionals); assistance to professional women to raise professionalism; cultural-educational measures; assistance for women's employment.
1995	Charity retains all above orientations; rights of certain population groups (ethnic minorities, professionals, orphans and homeless children, disabled children); assistance for employment, prevention of conflicts; legal education for women, familiarization with the experience of women's international movement; improvement of women's socioeconomic conditions. (This was the year of the Beijing Women's Conference.)
1996	Charity retains all above orientations; rights of certain population groups (disabled, internally displaced persons, ethnic minorities, professionals orphaned and homeless children); employment of the disabled, prevention of conflicts, women's legal education, familiarization with women's international movement experiences, improving women's socioeconomic conditions.
1997	Elevation of women's role and status in social, economic and political life; active involvement in the management process; extensive participation in the distribution of natural, material and financial resources; facilitation of participation in the conflict resolution process; design of development programs, employment assistance.
1998	All priorities of 1997 remain valid; additional priorities: elevation of the level of civic culture of women; assistance to women in the process of self-actualization; eradication of the gender imbalance in political and economic life; elaboration of the strategy of the women's movement; development of recommendations for state gender policy (UNDP 1999).

respective target groups. As time has passed, donors have had a significant effect on their development, capacity building, strategic thinking, and communications, as well as on the fundamental issues addressed and funding mechanisms.

Although the official number of registered women's NGOs is one thousand, one organization claims there were only between 50 and 60 truly active women's groups as of late 1999.* Many of these organizations are small, underfunded, lacking in capacity, and probably unsustainable ultimately. Nevertheless, they have two advantages. First, their leaders are members of the intelligentsia and thus have access to those with influence and money in the Georgian elite. Second, because the array

of topics relevant to women is broad, there is more than enough scope for start-up organizations to make a bid for funding from either local or international donors. Those that are already established have a good chance of receiving more funding once they have accounted for their first grant.

Activities of Women's Organizations

Women's organizations in Georgia carry out a fairly wide range of activities. Although some specialize in lobbying the government on particular women's issues, the majority are multipurpose, which means that there is a great deal of overlap among them.

Psychosocial Rehabilitation Programs

Because of the many social, economic, and political changes associated with the transition from a centralized state structure to a market-based economy and a democratic political system, all Georgians have been

*Personal communication with Lela Gaprindashvili of the Women's Initiative for Equality, 11/19/99; interview with Nina Tsihinstavi of the Caucasus Women's Research and Consulting Network, 10/11/99; interview with Marina Meskhi of the Women's Rights Study Group of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, 10/20/99.

undergoing stress for the past nine years. Various studies indicate that stress-related illnesses are common among all segments of the population, but perhaps are most common among women. The Association of Internally Displaced Women, which has been functioning since 1995, aims to restore the psychosocial well-being of women and implement educational programs. International NGOs such as the International Foundation of Conflictology and Negotiations Strategy and the Foundation for Human Resources have carried out various activities with the association, including psychotherapy and psychocorrection groups.

Many NGOs, both local and international, are beginning to recognize that men aged 35 to 50 are particularly vulnerable both psychologically and economically. Almost all internally displaced persons interviewed, both men and women, indicated that men are doubly traumatized because they are unable to support their families and because they have lost the war. Many are further shamed by the fact that their wives are bringing in whatever nonpension income they consume through low-status activities such as petty trading. These men are in such denial that they tend to shun income-generating or employment activities and retraining opportunities. Programs for men (and women) are largely in the self-reliance category, which usually refers to for small and medium-size enterprises or vocational training.

Programs in Microcredit And Small and Medium-Size Enterprises

Many donors are sponsoring microcredit schemes and training programs in small and medium-size enterprises for both men and women. There are also some vocational training programs, although probably fewer. The Foundation for International Community Assistance funded by USAID, is the only nongovernmental organization with a microlending program that does not require collateral. It targets women and makes many loans to the internally displaced on the basis of their apparent creditworthiness, since this is a group-lending operation and solidarity among displaced people (particularly women) is high. Most other programs operate or are designed to begin operating with highly subsidized interest rates. The Norwegian Refugee Council, for example, has had good luck with its other programs with the NGO Women in Business.

Because internally displaced women have become increasingly involved in small-scale trading in markets and

bazaars throughout the country, donors and women's organizations have begun partnering together on microcredit lending to women traders. The Norwegian Refugee Council has united with Women in Business to create a small-business revolving fund for up to a thousand clients, with the ultimate goal of transforming it into a self-sustaining credit union. Beginning with 100 lari (US\$50) loans at 3 percent interest with six-month terms, the loans will increase in number and volume as they are repaid. Although still in its first stages, the Norwegian Refugee Council/Women in Business partnership has had an almost flawless rate of payback. Similarly, the international NGO Save the Children works with the women's organization Constanta, whose primary role is to provide low-interest loans to groups of internally displaced women traders. By the spring of 1999, Constanta's loan portfolio consisted of nearly 220,000 lari and 2,480 clients, with a loan default rate under 2 percent.

Education and Training

Almost all the women's NGOs surveyed had some training or education-related activity. Educational levels of women in Georgia have traditionally been quite high. Among internally displaced persons, many women with university and graduate degrees have gravitated to the third sector in order to help others help themselves. They are involved in providing education (including English courses) for orphans and young people, as well as peace education for youths. One concern is that the level of educational attainment of all internally displaced youth is declining. Many are unable to go to school because they do not have money for books and appropriate clothes or they need to help make money for their families.

After the Abkhazian conflict, the Zugdidi representation of the Abkhaz Women's Council created the NGO Hope. Because Hope is typical of small, multiservice NGOs that are starting out, several of its educational activities are profiled below.

Human Rights and Civic Education

Some women's NGOs are primarily or exclusively advocacy organizations, working closely with members of Parliament and others to ensure that Georgia implements the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which the government signed in September 1994. With the support of

Two Women's Organizations

SOKHUMI

Three displaced women, two engineer–economists, and one teacher started Sokhumi, a humanitarian–cultural foundation, in September 1997. It was registered two years later. The president's husband, an industrialist, has sponsored this foundation. It has 50 women members who volunteer their time. Sokhumi has carried out 14 programs, of which 3 help elderly and 3 rehabilitate children. The foundation has established five centers: 1) a women's business development center, 2) an information center, 3) a youth center, 4) a social rehabilitation center, and 5) a cultural and educational center. It has received support from private sector, government, and international NGOs.

HOPE

Despite its "dependent" status as a representation of the Women's Council, Hope has carried out five projects since its inception in May 1996. The first project, sponsored by Oxfam and the Prince and Princess Ammata Foundation, was a social program to help refugee children and women. Hope has cooperated and received funding from the Association of IDP Women, "Consent," which conducts workshops, training, and consultation. It also has run three programs for young orphans. Under one of those programs, it ran a camp for 13- and 14-year-old orphans. The organization has since developed two other projects that it has submitted for funding. UNHCR is interested in funding one of the projects but is faced with budget constraints. The First Bank of Abkhazia, which serves internally displaced persons, has also promised to fund some activities, but Hope has yet to receive funding. In the interim, Hope is running a Sunday school at the director's home.

USAID and other donors, the Young Lawyer's Association, while not a women's organization as such, has done considerable work to define and guarantee women's legal, human, and civil rights.

In January 2000, the Georgian women's group Women's Initiative for Equality began spearheading efforts to create an umbrella group of women's NGOs. The group seeks to force implementation of various tasks, including presidential decree 551, which is designed to enhance women's participation in political activity. (As of press time, the decree had yet to be signed.)

Constraints on Performance

A variety of factors prevent Georgian NGOs—and perhaps particularly women's NGOs—from enhancing their performance. Most are not unique to Georgia and are characteristic of most developing countries. Examples include the lack of a history of volunteerism, problems of corruption and inadequate codes of ethics, blurred distinctions between the third sector and the private sector (or in the Georgian case, the public sector), overlapping board memberships, and hijacking of the nongovernmental sector by interlocking elites.

A second group of factors, once again common to the nongovernmental sector in other countries, has to do with funding, financial management, and financial planning for sustainability. Most donors are relatively strict about bookkeeping and accounting for funds. USAID, though, is generally considered to be the strictest in its accounting requirements. That Horizonti has passed a section 195 USAID audit after only one year of operation is a singular success. Few donors, however, have been prepared to invest in helping private voluntary and nongovernmental organizations plan for sustainability over even the medium term. Even in countries where NGO block grants have been in existence for a long time or where NGO umbrella projects have been put in place to enhance the capacity of local NGOs, disaster frequently strikes when the donor departs or when the local nongovernmental is supposed to "graduate."

Many Georgian NGOs are in comparatively better positions than their non-former Soviet Union counterparts because their founders, members, and even many of their beneficiaries are literate and highly educated. The idea of public accountability may not be widespread, but the fundamentals of keeping accounts are. Competent bookkeepers and accountants—especially women—are

among the categories of newly unemployed. But strategic planning for sustainability is a skill probably as poorly represented in Georgia as in most transitioning countries. Nonetheless, some of the organizations encountered are already established as foundations and will

likely be able to devise ways to obtain additional capital. Several of these and others, such as the Abkhaz Women's Council, have started reaching out to local private sector firms for event or special-appeal funding.

3. Impact of Women's Organizations

Beneficiaries

Clearly, women's organizations are having a significant impact on a variety of beneficiaries. Largely service-oriented organizations are delivering programs ranging from psychosocial rehabilitation to credit and business planning training. Among the women's organizations working on women's rights and advocating women's empowerment in the political, economic, and social spheres, capacity is increasing and progress is being made through legislation. The major problems are now considered to be information dissemination and training in all societal sectors rather than legislative reform as such.

Government-organized NGOs and donor-organized NGOs are also contributing significantly to knowledge building, research, networking, leadership training, and direct service provision to a wide range of beneficiaries, including internally displaced persons. The most reputable government-organized NGO is the Abkhaz Women's Council, which—even though it is an independent, nonpartisan, non-political NGO—still receives in-kind support from the Abkhaz government in exile and the Georgian government. The most notable donor-organized NGO is Horizonti, which evolved from an earlier group and was quickly certified as an eligible private voluntary organization for USAID funding. Horizonti provides grant funding for a variety of purposes to other Georgian NGOs, including women's and internally displaced women's organizations.

It is difficult to provide hard data on the numbers and varieties of beneficiaries served by local nongovernmentals. Many NGOs have a small membership and the numbers of beneficiaries they help directly may be limited. This is the case for many NGOs dealing with internally displaced persons, in part because they are new and in part because they have yet to be considered for larger funding. This may soon change with the advent of the new UN–World Bank–government of Georgia

program for self-reliance, including a proposed self-reliance fund.

Women Leaders

Given the number of highly educated women in Georgia combined with the disastrous posttransition economic slump, many qualified women have suddenly been economically and professionally displaced. As one informant expressed it, “Before, women were less visible because they were inside buildings, working in offices. Now, they have lost those jobs and have to seek other kinds of employment literally in the street, often below their former status, and well below their qualifications.” This also applies to internally displaced women, both those who provide assistance and those whom they assist. They are trading in the bazaars, on roadsides, in subway underpasses, and in local communities. Some, usually the elderly, are begging. Others are working in the service sector as, for example, manicurists or kiosk keepers and shop clerks. Thus, in leadership positions and experience in high-level occupations, both displaced and other Georgian women professionals are being *disempowered*.

One way for these women to recoup their lost status is to found or participate in nongovernmental organizations. This in part explains the recent proliferation of NGOs of all kinds, especially those pertaining to women. Although women from the intelligentsia do not monopolize power and authority, they do constitute a barrier to women who are less highly trained and skilled who might otherwise create or manage NGOs or other types of groups. There is a sense in which these women leaders—even though they too suffered deprivation in income, social status, and physical comfort—are still at the top of the social hierarchy, just below the former *nomenklatura*. For example, one NGO founder is a senior academician whose husband was a city mayor in Abkhazia. Another is a former deputy in the Supreme

Council in Abkhazia. Yet another is the wife of a prominent industrialist who herself was a highly skilled professional until she became internally displaced.

The situation is similar for women who are in leadership positions of non-IDP NGOs. Not surprisingly, as Georgia continues its transition to a democratic state with a free-market economy, new leadership positions open up. But in many instances, the same people fill them or influence who fills them. Socioeconomic and political status, personal or family wealth, and current influence—whether legitimate or based on corrupt alliances—all tend to meld together a series of interlocking elite groups.

Few women's NGO leaders have attempted to make the jump from the third sector to politics. The most prominent exception is Lika Nadaraia, head of the Feminist Club, who ran unsuccessfully for Parliament in 1999 on an independent ticket. Many women's NGO leaders shun the political limelight and disagree strongly with leaders such as Ms. Nadaraia who are trying to enter politics. Several leaders interviewed pointed out that nongovernmentals need to improve before they can forge direct links with political parties.*

There is a strong and perhaps growing divide between political party activity and women's NGOs. As the UNDP noted in a focus group survey on the conditions of women in Georgia, women increasingly have joined women's organizations in lieu of political parties because they perceive that political parties are not sensitive to their needs. Moreover, to be effective, the organizations themselves needed to remain or appear to remain independent of political links. Several organizational leaders repeated the widely held belief that the political system was ineffective at promoting needed reform and that parties and political figures were often too compromised or corrupt to take action to improve the lot of women throughout the country.†

*1999 shadow report by CEDAW; interview with Nina Tshinstavi of the Caucasus Women's Research and Consulting Network, 10/11/99; interview with Marina Meskhi of the Women's Rights Study Group of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, 10/20/99.

†UNDP 1998; interview with Nina Tshinstavi of the Caucasus Women's Research and Consulting Network, 10/11/99; interview with Marina Meskhi of the Women's Rights Study Group of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, 10/20/99.

The few women who have made it into the upper reaches of political life have openly eschewed women's organizations and many of their concerns, much to the regret of women organizational leaders. Established female politicians fear being marginalized and isolated in the eyes of the overall Georgian electorate as "women's leaders" and hence are openly antagonistic toward "feminist" ideas and the legal promotion of women's rights in general. Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia, the most prominent women in politics and leader of the opposition National Democratic Party, openly derided feminism as "worse than homosexuality."

Government and Public Policy

Although the Georgian government has cooperated with women's organizations and recently promoted gender issues, it has done so largely under pressure from international agencies and increasingly well-organized women's organizations. The Georgian leadership and Parliament legally enabled the growth of civil society in general and women's groups in particular by passing the Civil Code in 1995. But the government has not made gender issues a high priority in its struggle to establish and strengthen Georgia's democratic governance and economy. Both the women's leaders interviewed and the existing literature indicate that many of the most pressing discrimination issues (the right of inheritance, equal employment opportunities, decision-making within the household) have deep roots in Georgian cultural traditions. The government itself has done little to challenge or even monitor traditional discrimination. There are, in fact, no current laws or policy statements defining and regulating discrimination against women (CEDAW Shadow Report).

The government waited nearly five years to submit its first full report to the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women on discrimination in Georgia. Not surprisingly, many of its findings were perfunctory and overly optimistic. In response to the government's report, three women's organizations (the Women's Rights Study Group of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, the Feminist Club, and the Center of Strategic Research and Development of Georgia) wrote a "shadow report" drawing on the research and findings of a large number of Georgian women's groups. The shadow report was deeply critical of both the women's rights situation in Georgia and the government's efforts in promoting them.

Both the government and the shadow report were submitted separately to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which in turn judged, drew lessons from each, and presented a list of recommendations. These recommendations were then delivered to the Georgian government. In a surprising move, President Shevardnadze prepared a draft decree (presidential decree 511) in the summer of 1999 based on the committee's recommendations. Many women's organizations were understandably enthusiastic about this development, taking it as a positive step in the evolution of women's organizational strength. Since its drafting,

though, the decree has languished on the floor of Parliament.

Most women's NGO leaders interviewed for this study characterized the government's positions toward women's organizations, women's rights, and gender issues as largely indifferent. Many were disillusioned with the leadership's inability and unwillingness to implement laws and decrees designed to promote women's rights. Others remained exasperated with the government's acceptance of traditional gender roles.

4. Women's Organizations and The International Community

The international community and official aid donors have been the primary source of funding for women's organizations since the first wave of registration in 1994. Indeed, while analysts and scholars have pointed to the recent explosive growth of organizational life in Georgia as a highlight of post-Soviet reform and societal change, they also stress that this explosion would not have occurred without a healthy infusion of international assistance. Today, nearly all major international assistance institutions active in the country provide financial support to women's organizations. Conversely, most women's organizations remain wholly or mostly dependent on some form of international assistance for survival.

Donors have recognized that women's organizations are particularly effective partners in assessing the needs of vulnerable communities, particularly internally displaced persons. Many international organizations are aware that war and displacement have uniquely affected women, many of whom have increasingly carried the burden of providing for their families. Women have thus been singled out for a variety of programs, ranging from emergency humanitarian assistance to small business development.

The nature of international assistance has changed radically in recent years. The transformation is particularly true of aid designed to help the displaced and more vulnerable segments of Georgian society. Before 1998, donors concentrated on two broad types of assistance. On a macro level, much effort was directed at helping a battered and unstable government shore up tottering eco-

nomie and political institutions in the wake of its near collapse in 1993.

At the same time, international assistance organizations targeted the internally displaced and other intensely vulnerable populations by providing food, clothing, and rehabilitated shelter—aid, in other words, targeted to satisfy the most immediate needs of the more drastically affected. Within several years, however, many donors concluded that local populations were not being sufficiently helped through their programs. Some feared that a culture of dependency on emergency assistance had been created within the community of displaced persons, while little had been done to alleviate the suffering of the majority of Georgians, 43 percent of whom lived below the poverty line (World Bank 1998).

Beginning in 1998, donor agencies and international NGOs—including USAID, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, and CARE—began shifting their programs from emergency humanitarian assistance activities to sustainable development programs designed to help vulnerable communities and individuals help themselves. Donors began looking toward enhancing the self-reliance of displaced persons through professional and agricultural training activities and microcredit programs. The strategy was to provide a bridge from emergency to development programs for displaced and in-place communities alike. Local people now were not just being targeted for relief; in some instances, they were involved in carrying out and sometimes even designing novel programs.

Through its Community Participation Program begun in 1999, for example, the International Rescue Committee took the bold step of grouping internally displaced persons with local residents in 10 western Georgian communities to address broader community needs and problems. Similarly, Save the Children's \$6-million Georgian Assistance Initiative, funded by USAID, sought to address the difficulties faced by broader war-damaged communities, including but not exclusive to displaced persons, through grants to local and international NGOs with innovative ideas in the fields of health, housing, and agriculture.

In their desire to target local populations more effectively, donors have emphasized newfound relationships with Georgia's nascent NGOs—in particular, women's organizations. Donors have provided women's groups with funding for a wide range of projects covering the full spectrum of their operational activities. Groups such as the Abkhaz Women's Council and the Association of Internally Displaced Abkhaz Women have been increasingly important conduits for distributing humanitarian aid and providing basic health services. More broadly, donors acknowledge the quiet but growing role women play as decision-makers and leaders within their nuclear families and communities, particularly in collective centers for internally displaced persons. USAID, for example, has funded a series of leadership training programs organized by the Academy for Educational Development for heads of women's organizations.

As donors move away from humanitarian assistance and cooperate more fully with women's organizations, some difficulties have been encountered. Women's organizations, like all NGOs in Georgia, are generally donor dependent. Their programs and even their very existence are often tied to donor funding and the grants available to them. To attract needed funding, dynamic organizations such as the International Medical Women's Fund do not specialize in a sector in which they might have a comparative advantage, such as health. Instead, they broaden their scope to include issues such as women's legal rights education. Other groups, such as Constanta, are literally donor-organized NGOs. These NGOs are created for the simple reason that international assistance organizations conclude that no existing women's organizations could be effective partners. Other organizations are government organized, created by government individuals or offices to attract funding designed for NGOs. Although much of the work done by such organizations has been and continues to be productive, the existence of successful government-organized nongovernmentals and donor-organized nongovernmentals reflects the fact that few mature and fully independent women's organizations exist in Georgia. Alternatively, where a local NGO has preassistance capacity, it may find donor management styles difficult to accept, as was the case for the Foundation for the Development of Human Resources. Although not a women's organization, the foundation has reached a stage that several women's organizations will soon attain.



5. General Findings and Conclusions

Limited Participation

The fieldwork confirms earlier findings that membership in women's organizations tends to be limited, even for organizations with regional branches. A survey of internally displaced women conducted by the team indicated that only 17 percent of respondents belong to any organization, including NGOs and political parties. Women's leaders and experts stressed that women do not necessarily want to collaborate any more than men do. One possible explanation is that ordinary women, particularly those who are internally displaced, are too preoccupied with the struggle for survival, thereby having little time to give to organizations.

Upper Socioeconomic Strata Leadership

Leaders of women's organizations come almost exclusively from the intelligentsia, although some are wives of businessmen or politicians. With one exception, all the leaders the team met had at least an undergraduate degree, and many had been professors or researchers. Most also had previous political and social visibility. However, they were not operating in their fields of expertise and in most instances admitted that they had had little management experience or organizational know-how.

Duplication of Activities

Most of the organizations studied are doing similar activities. They are not specializing but instead are replicating other organizations' activities, often in the same location. Since many are operating outside their main areas of expertise, they would benefit from the help of outside specialists but apparently do not call on other women and organizations to meet this need. Interviews indicated that one potential consortium intended to include 16 women's organizations but was not yet formally established because no one could agree on a leader.

Perceptions About Donor Impartiality

Everywhere the team traveled, including Tbilisi, there was a conviction that only an in-group of NGOs receive donor funding and that this group does not grow much. It is perceived that once a particular NGO becomes a given donor's "darling," it continues to receive funding from that donor to the exclusion of others. Members of donors' local staffs—or their relatives and friends—create some of these favorites. Moreover, the spouses or family members of Georgian government officials tend to create or work for NGOs that receive donor funding, or they receive scarce positions at international NGOs that have grant funds.

Sustainability of Women's Organizations

As mentioned earlier, most estimates concur that women's NGOs worth counting number than 60 or so, although 1,000 are registered. These so-called best-placed women's organizations either have managed donor funds effectively more than once or have participated in enough donor-funded capacity building to be seen as worthy of funding. Sixty women's NGOs for a population of 5.4 million, of whom more than half are women, seems at first glance to be a relatively few. On closer inspection, though, we find there are more nascent women's regional organizations not yet counted among this group. These are likely to receive direct grants from at least one donor in the next three years. In addition, local councils and municipalities will probably begin to receive direct funding—for example, from the World Bank and USAID—a development that in some cases may diminish available funding for NGOs.

The next few years are an ideal time for donors and NGOs to work on partnerships, consortiums, and endowments so that sustainability becomes more likely beyond even the 60 "best" NGOs. Not all organizations, no matter how worthy their aims or how gifted and sincere their founders, can ultimately be sustained unless the Georgian economy improves dramatically and a new tradition of voluntarism is developed. To survive without significant external funding, membership-based organizations will need to become bigger and require membership dues. Whether this kind of organizational structure lends itself to life in post-Soviet Georgia remains to be seen.

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